

Introduction to Email Interviews on Current Challenges Facing the Arab Women's Movements

The idea for this section arose from the realization that the historical evaluation studies at the front of the issue needed some counterbalancing appraisal of the present. But this need presented us with many problems, among them the number and diversity of the women's movements, the small pool of specialists with a regional overview, the difficulty for grassroots activists of extricating themselves sufficiently from day-to-day activities to analyze their situation. There was also the problem of the polar differences of ideological viewpoints from which the present could be reviewed. Such differences extend from those of liberal inclination who perceive the proliferation of women's NGOs as a sign of progress, and others who see it as a symptom of fragmentation and loss of the original Arab women's movement of its momentum and unity; between those who welcome all UN and Western intervention in the 'woman question', and others who see international agency support for 'gender equality' as an attempt to undermine Arab/Islamic family values and identity; between those who see the Arab women's movements as having achieved popular acceptance of basic rights (eg. women's right to education), and those who see them as unable to overcome historical, cultural and structural limitations. For a few scholars, however carefully selected, fully to present this diversity of contemporary women's movements over such a large and heterogeneous region would be an almost impossible task.

The halfway 'solution' we reached was to maximize as far as we could the variety of viewpoints by inviting 20 scholars and grassroots activists to participate in an email interview. We tried to select respondents from as broad a regional and ideological spectrum as possible, so you will find interviewees from Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Algeria, Morocco, and Sudan as well as countries with older, more studied women's movements, such as Egypt and Lebanon. Ideological viewpoints include liberal, radical and Muslim feminist.

We selected the questions through a process of Editorial Committee consultation, designing them to elicit focus on specific aspects of the women's movements that may be termed critical. Readers may find that many questions they deem more essential than ours have been omitted. If so, we invite you to send your comments, to be published in a forthcoming issue.

We asked all the interviewees to send us photos. Thanks to the three who did, but we felt that, with so few, we could not use them.

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The Interview Questions - (NB: AWM is an acronym for Arab women's movements.)

1. What in your view has been the greatest achievement of the AWM(s) so far? What has been its/their greatest failure?
2. Conservative forces in the region accuse the AWMs of being overly influenced by 'Western feminism'. Is this charge justified in your view? What is the best response?
3. What are the factors that account for the spread of religious fundamentalism among women and men in the Arab region? Does this religious revivalism threaten the AWMs? Can Islam (or any other religion) offer a long-term basis for struggle for women's rights?
4. Today we find the AWMs doing social work, adult literacy, research, legal counseling, and other kinds of activity. Is this pluralism good or bad in your view?
5. Do you think there should be more struggle for family law reform?
6. In the past, the AWMs mainly looked to the 'West' for models and affiliations: should they form relations with women's movements in the 'East' — Iran, Africa, India, Pakistan, etc?
7. Up to now leaders and members of the AWMs have been mainly educated urban women: what stops the spread of the struggle for women's rights to women of other classes?
8. Most AWMs are characterized by non-elected and non-accountable leaders who make decisions without consulting members. Should the AWMs adopt more democratic structures and practices?
9. Have AWM members done enough to change gender relations and practices in society, and in their own families?
10. Most Arab countries contain non-Arabic speaking minorities: what has been, and should be, the policy of AWMs towards them?
11. Should we avoid the term 'Arab feminism' as implying the existence of an 'Arab woman' and creating a false idea of Arab homogeneity?
12. What has been the impact of the UN Decade for Women and its offshoot agencies (eg UNIFEM) on the AWMs?
13. The number of women professionals and scholars in the Arab region has been rapidly expanding: what effects has this had on the AWMs?
14. What do you see as the greatest obstacles to the growth and development of the AWMs today?
15. What of the future? If you were able change one element in the present set-up of the AWMs, what would it be?